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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR
 REDIRECTION OF SERVER EXTERNAL
 HYPER-LINK REFERENCES**

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(75) Inventors: **Steven T. Kirsch**, Los Altos;
Christopher J. Lindblad, Oakland,
 both of CA (US)

(73) Assignee: **Infoseek Corporation**, Santa Clara, CA
 (US)

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 Dec. 23, 1997, now Pat. No. 5,870,546, which is a continu-
 ation of application No. 08/604,468, filed on Feb. 21, 1996,
 now Pat. No. 5,751,956.

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(58) Field of Search 709/203, 229,
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 27, 30, 14; 713/201

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Primary Examiner—Zarni Maung

Assistant Examiner—Abdullahi E. Salad

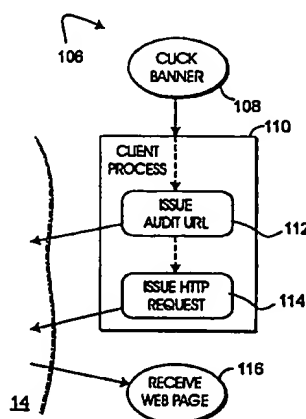
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—Daniel G. Chapik;
 Oppenheimer, Wolff & Donnelly, LLP

(57)

ABSTRACT

A message is provided to a tracking server system in
 response to a client system referencing a predetermined
 resource locator that corresponds to a resource external to
 the tracking server system. The tracking server system
 indirectly provides for the client system to have an infor-
 mational element selectable by the client system, where the
 informational element is graphically identified on the client
 system with informational content obtainable from a content
 server system through use of a content resource locator. The
 informational element includes a tracking resource locator,
 referencing the tracking server system, and data identifying
 the informational element. The selection of the informa-
 tional element causes the client system to use the tracking
 resource locator to provide the data to the tracking server
 system and to use the content resource locator to obtain the
 informational content from the content server system.

14 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



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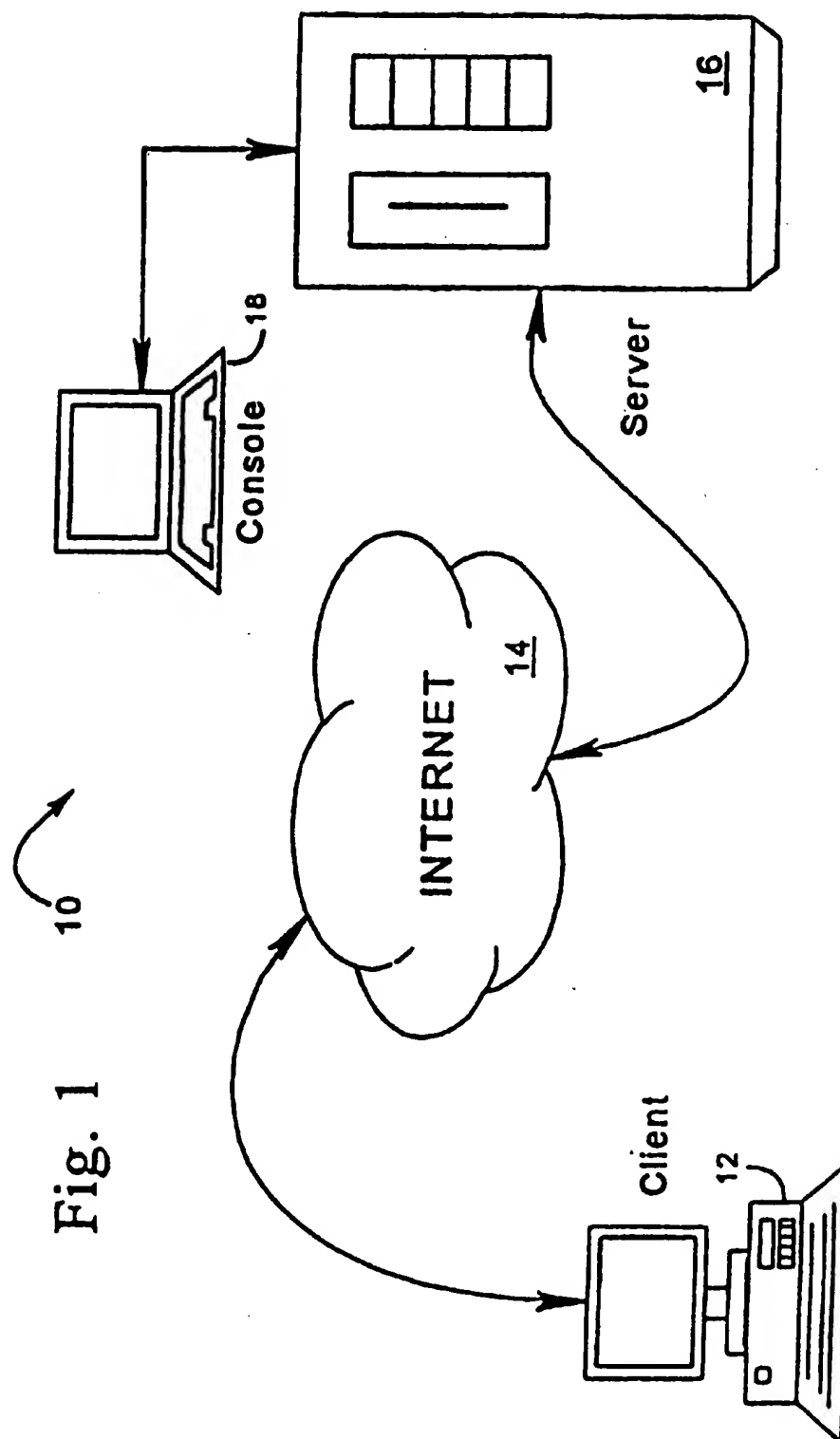
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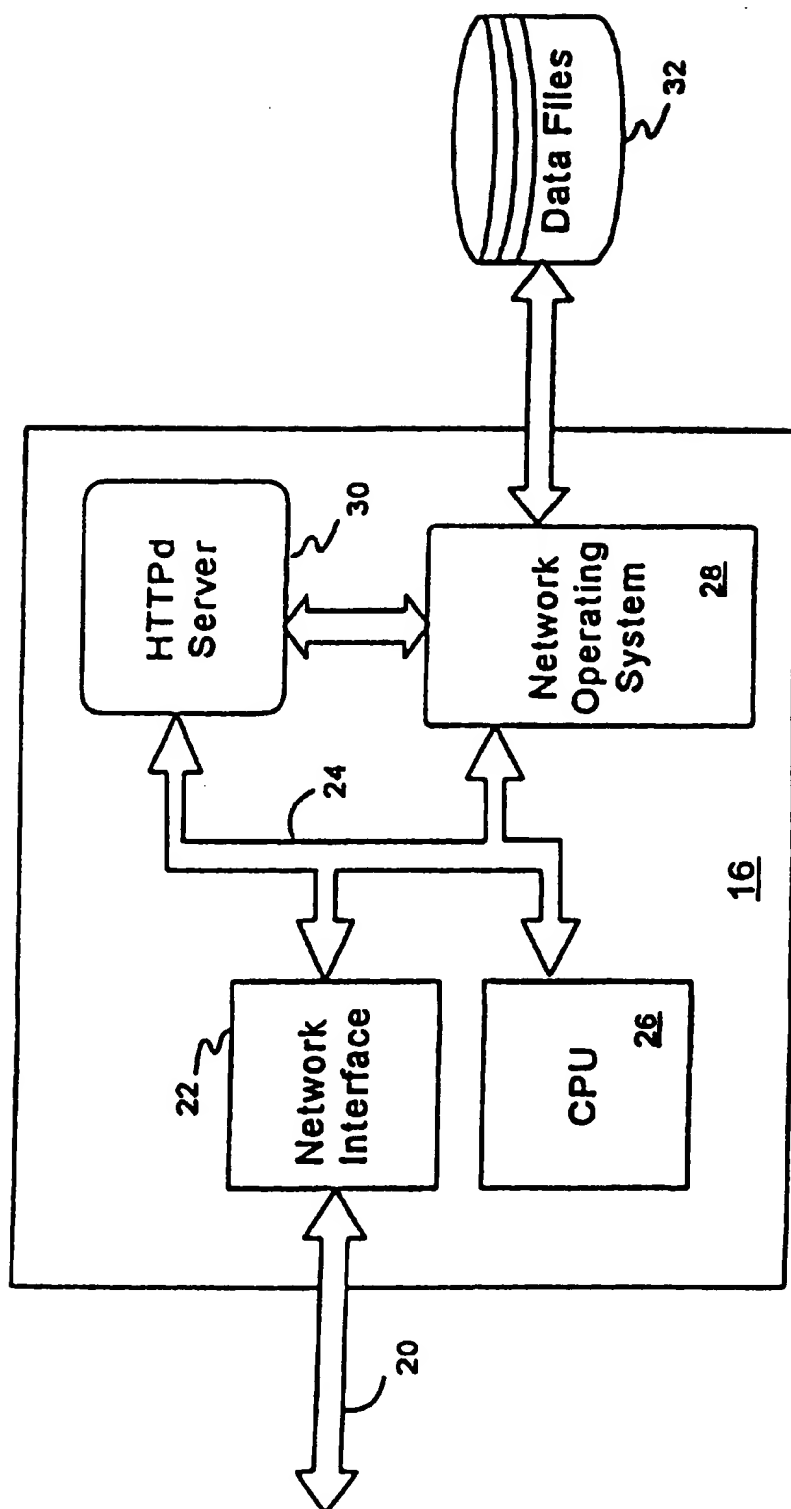
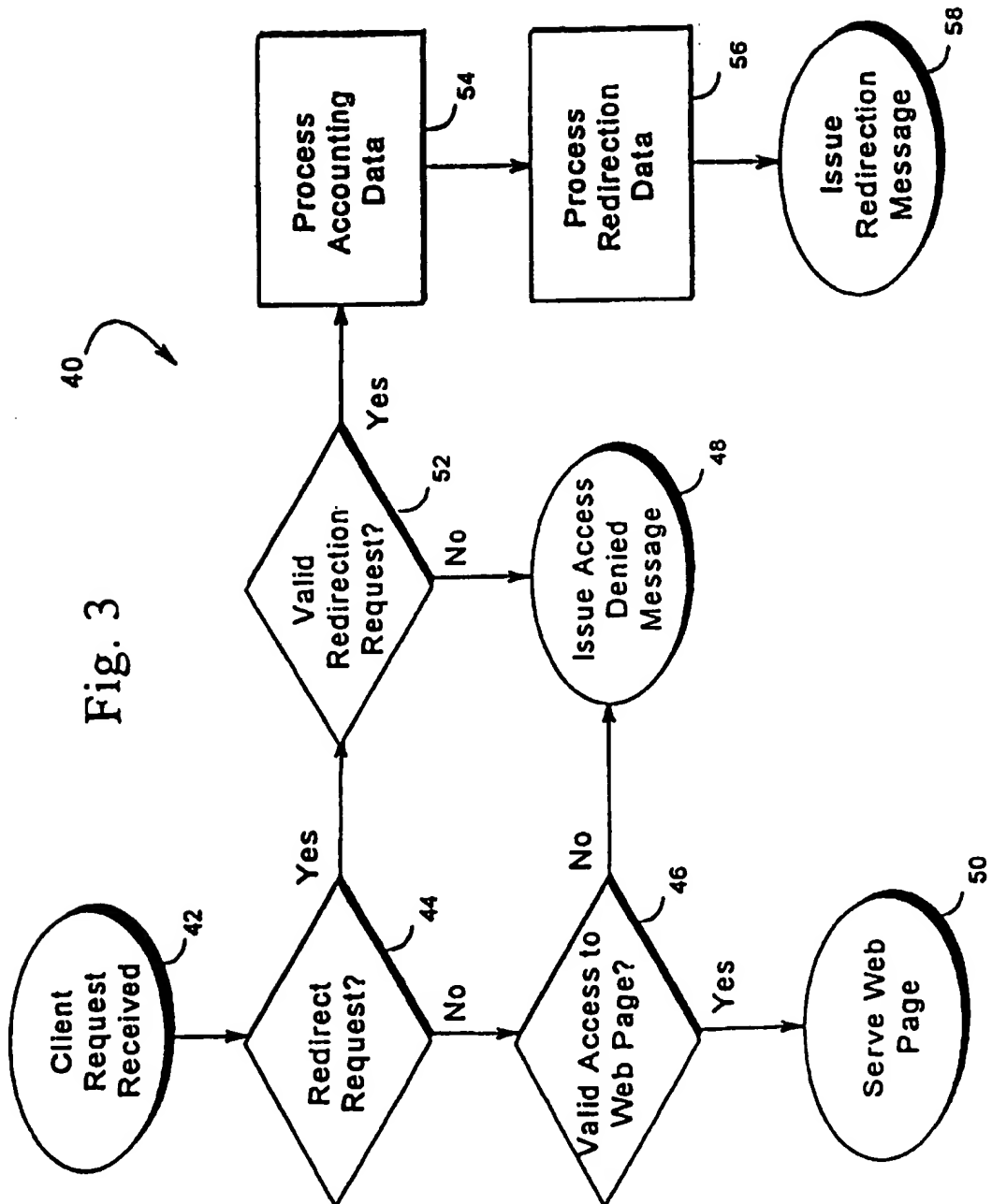


Fig. 2



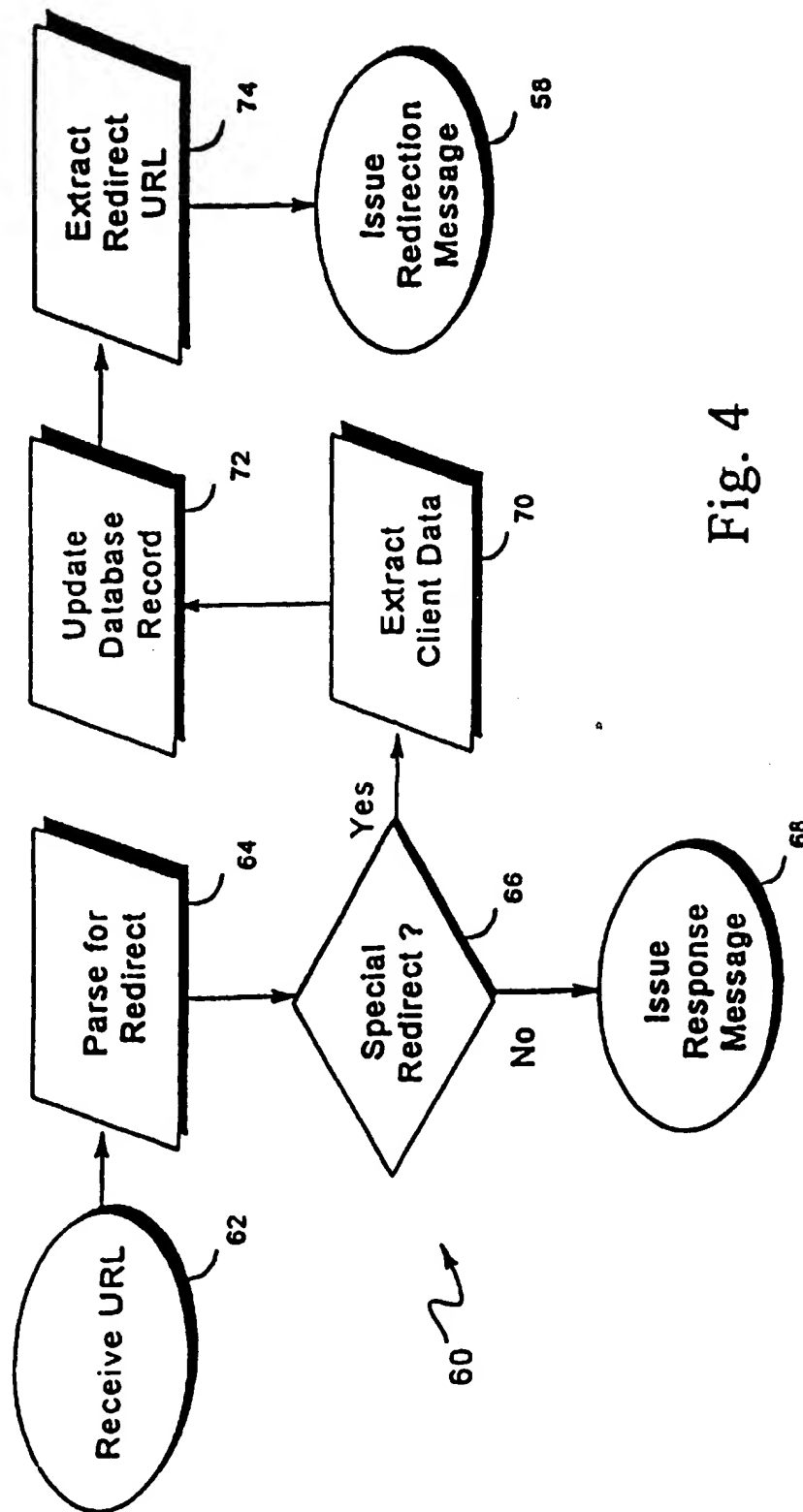
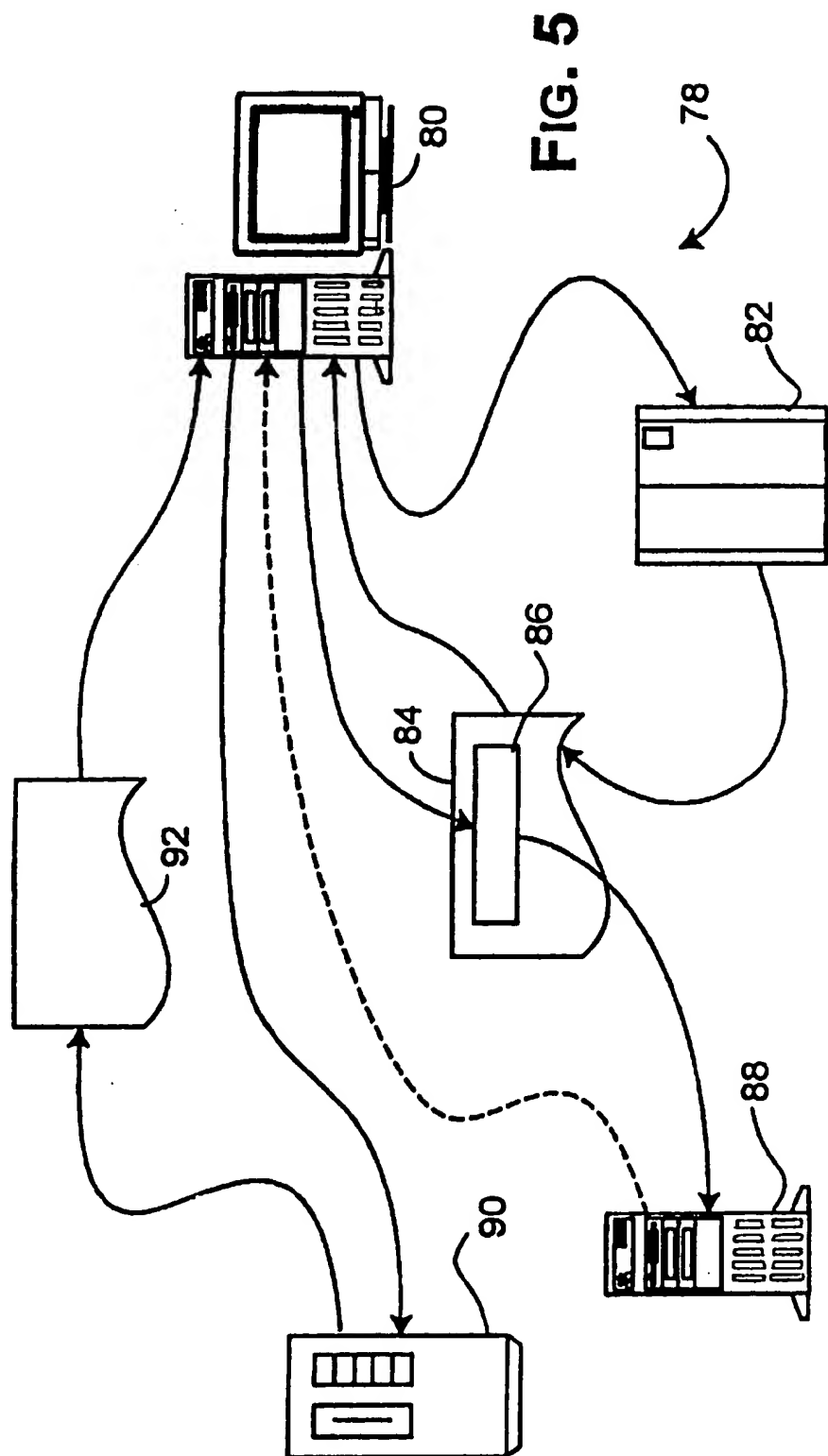
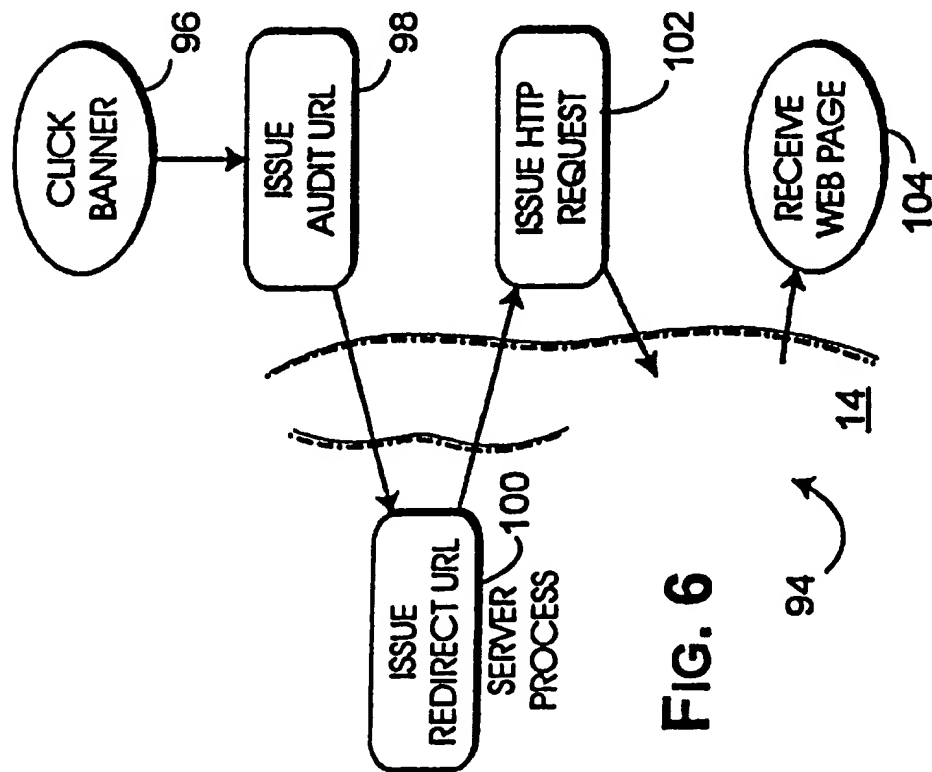
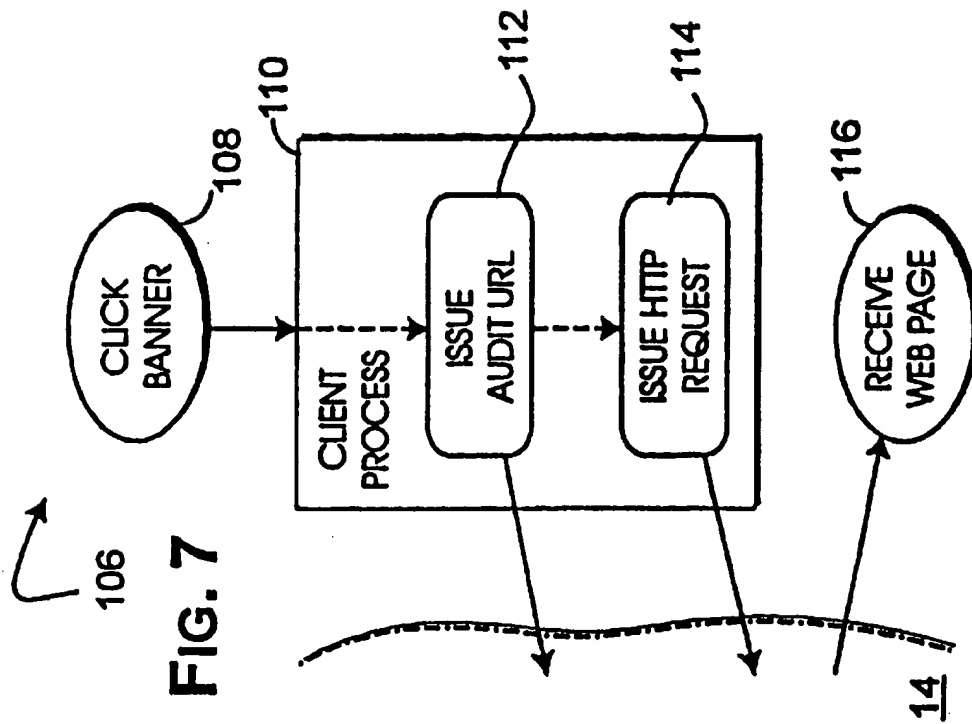


Fig. 4





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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR REDIRECTION OF SERVER EXTERNAL HYPER-LINK REFERENCES

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation-in-part of application Ser. No. 08/999,727, filed Dec. 23, 1997, now U.S. Pat. No. 5,870,546, which is a continuation of application Ser. No. 08/604,468, filed Feb. 21, 1996, now U.S. Pat. No. 5,751,956.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention is generally related to the control of network information server systems supporting World Wide Web based data pages and, in particular, to a server system and process for efficiently redirecting external server hyper-link references for purposes of controlling, moderating, and accounting for such references.

2. Description of the Related Art

The recent substantial growth and use of the internationally connected network generally known as the Internet has largely been due to widespread support of the hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP). This protocol permits client systems connected through Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to access independent and geographically scattered server systems also connected to the Internet. Client side browsers, such as Netscape Mozilla® and Navigator® (Netscape Communications Corp.), Microsoft Internet Explorer® and NCSA Mosaic™, provide efficient graphical user interface based client applications that implement the client side portion of the HTTP protocol.

Server side application programs, generically referred to as HTTPd servers, implement the server side portion of the HTTP protocol. HTTP server applications are available both commercially, from companies such as Netscape, and as copyrighted freeware available in source code form from NCSA.

The distributed system of communication and information transfer made possible by the HTTP protocol is commonly known as the World Wide Web (WWW or W3) or as simply "the Web." From a client side user interface perspective, a system of uniform resource locators (URLs) is used to direct the operation of a web browser in establishing atomic transactional communication sessions with designated web server computer systems. In general, each URL is of the basic form:

`http://<server_name>.<sub-domain.top_level-domain>/<path>`

The server_name is typically "www" and the sub-domain.top-level_domain is a standard Internet domain reference. The path is an optional additional URL qualifier.

Specification by user selection of a URL on the client side results in a transaction being established in which the client sends the server an HTTP message referencing a default or explicitly named data file constructed in accordance with the hypertext mark up language (HTML). This data file or web page is returned in one or more response phase HTTP messages by the server, generally for display by the client browser. Additional embedded image references may be identified in the returned web page resulting in the client browser initiating subsequent HTML transactions to retrieve typically embedded graphics files. A fully reconstructed web

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page image is then presented by the browser through the browser's graphical user interface.

Due to the completely distributed client/server architecture of the Web, as made possible by the URL system further supported by the existing Internet name resolution services and routing conventions, HTTP servers can be independently established with little difficulty. Consequently, the Web has no centrally or even regionally enforced organization other than loosely by name of the top level domain. Searching for information or other resources provided by individual HTTP servers is therefore problematic almost by definition. Because of the time, cost and complexity of assembling comprehensive, yet efficiently searchable databases of web information and resources, commercial Internet Business Services (IBS) have been established to provide typically fee based or advertising revenue supported search engine services that operate against compilations of the information and resources available via the Web correlated to source URLs. Access to such search engines is usually provided through server local web pages served by the Internet Business Services. The results of a search are served in the form of local web pages with appropriate embedded remote or hyper-linked URLs dynamically constructed by the server of the Internet Business Service.

Because of the opportunity presented by the likely repeated client access and retrieval of search engine and search result web pages, providers of other Internet based services have begun to actively place advertisements on these web pages. As is typical in advertising mediums, the frequency of display of an advertisement generally defines the compensation paid to the advertisement publisher. Thus, the number of times that an advertisement is simply transferred to a client browser provides an indication of how effectively the advertisement is being published. A more direct measure of the effectiveness of a particular advertisement on a particular web page is the number of times a client web browser chooses to actively pursue the URL represented by the advertisement. Thus, there is a need to be able to track information obtainable from a client browser when a hyper-linked advertiser's URL is selected.

The difficulty in obtaining direct reference information arises from the fact that a web page with an embedded advertisement and corresponding remote URL is served in its entirety to the client browser upon first reference to the web page. The selection of a particular advertiser's URL is then by definition performed through an independent transaction directed to the HTTPd server associated with the advertiser. Since the advertiser publishing HTTPd server is not part of this subsequent transaction, the publishing server is conventionally incapable of tracking client browser hyper-links actually executed to an advertiser's URL or any other URLs embedded in a web page previously served to the client browser.

Simple web page access counters are relatively well known and used throughout the Web. These access counters are based on a common gateway interface (CGI) facility supported by modern HTTPd server systems. The CGI facility permits generally small programs, at least typically in terms of function, to be executed by a server in response to a client URL request. That is, the HTML web page definition provides for the embedding of a specific HTML reference that will specify execution of a server side CGI program as part of the process of the web browser reconstructing an image of a served web page. Such a HTML reference is typically of the form:

``

Thus, a counter value incremented with each discrete execution of the CGI program (count.cgi) dynamically provides part of the displayable image of the reconstructed web page. The time, remote client requester, client domain, client browser type and other information that may be known through the operation of the HTTP protocol may be logged as part of the CGI program's function. Consequently, a reasonable manner of accounting and auditing for certain web page accesses exists.

Access counters, however, fundamentally log only server local web page accesses. The client browser to the CGI program is evaluated by the client in connection with the initial serving of the web page to the client browser. The initial serving of the web page to the client browser can be connected, but any subsequent selection of a URL that provides a hyper-link reference to an external server is not observed and therefore is not counted by a CGI program based access counter. Other limitations of access counters arise from the fact that the implementing CGI program is an independently loadable executable. The CGI program must be discretely loaded and executed by the server computer system in response to each URL reference to the CGI program. The repeated program loading and execution overhead, though potentially small for each individual invocation of the CGI program, can represent a significant if not substantial load to the sever computer system. The frequent execution of CGI programs is commonly associated with a degradation of the effective average access time of the HTTPd server in responding to client URL requests. Since an Internet Business Service providing access to a search engine logs millions of requests each day, even small reductions in the efficiency of serving web pages can seriously degrade the cost efficiency of the Internet Business Service. As of December, 1995, Infoseek Corporation, in particular, handles an average of five million retrievals a day.

The execution overhead associated with CGI programs is often rather significant. Many CGI programs are implemented at least in part through the use of an interpreted language such as Perl or TCL. Consequently, a substantial processing overhead is involved in multiple mass storage transfers to load both the interpreter and CGI program scripts, to process the scripts through the execution of the interpreter, and then actually log whatever useful data is generated, typically to persistent mass storage. Finally, the interpreter and/or CGI program may have to be unloaded.

In addition, external CGI programs present a significant problem in terms of maintenance, including initial and ongoing server configuration and control, and security in the context of a busy server system. Individual CGI programs will likely be needed for each independent web page in order to separately identify web page service counts. Alternatively, a CGI program can be made sufficiently complex to be able to distinguish the precise manner in which the program is called so as to identify a particular web page and log an appropriately distinctive access count. Maintenance of such CGI programs on a server system where large numbers of page accesses are being separately counted is non trivial.

Further, the existence of external programs, particularly of scripts that are interpreted dynamically, represents a potential security problem. In particular, the access and execute permissions of interpreted scripts must be carefully managed and monitored to prevent any unauthorized script from being executed that could, in turn, compromise the integrity of the data being collected if not the fundamental integrity of the server computer system itself. Consequently, known access counters provide no solution directly in full or in part to the need to account or audit URL references to

external servers based on hyper-links from previously served web pages.

The HTTP protocol itself provides for a basic server based system of URL redirection for servers and clients supporting the 1.5 or later versions of the HTTP protocol. A configuration file associated with an HTTP server (typically srm.conf) can specify a redirect directive that effectively maps a server local directory URL reference to an external URL reference through the use of a configuration directive of the form:

```
Redirect /dir1 http://newserver.widget.com/dir1
```

When a Version 1.5 or later HTTP server receives a URL reference to a local directory (/dir1) that is specified as above for redirection, a redirect message is returned to the client browser including a new location in the form of an URL (http://newserver.widget.com/dir1). This redirect URL is then used by the client browser as the basis for a conventional client URL request.

This existing server based redirection function is insufficient to support external server access tracking since, in its usual form, the redirection is of the entire directory hierarchy that shares a common redirected base directory. Even in the most restricted form, the redirection is performed on a per directory reference basis. Thus, every access to the directory, independent of the particular web page or graphics image or CGI program that is the specific object of an access request is nonetheless discretely redirected without distinction. Any potential use of the existing server redirect function is therefore exceedingly constrained if not practically prohibited by the HTTP protocol defined operation of the redirect directive.

Furthermore, the redirect directive capability of the HTTP protocol server does not provide for the execution of a CGI program or other executable coincident with the performance of the redirection thereby essentially precluding any action to capture information related to the redirect URL request. In addition, the complexity of the resource configuration file necessary to specify redirection down to a per directory configuration again raises significant configuration, maintenance and, to a lesser degree, security issues. Thus, server redirection does not possess even the basic capabilities necessary to support external URL hyper-link reference auditing or accounting.

Finally, a form of redirection might be accomplished though the utilization of a relatively complex CGI program. Such a redirection CGI program would likely need to perform some form of alternate resource identification as necessary to identify a redirection target URL. Assuming that a unique target URL can be identified, a redirection message can then be returned to a client from the CGI program through the HTTP server as necessary to provide a redirection URL to the client browser.

Unfortunately, any such CGI program would embody all of the disadvantages associated with even the simplest access counter programs. Not only would problems of execution load and latency, as well as configuration, maintenance and security remain, but such an approach to providing redirection is inherently vulnerable to access spoofing. Access spoofing is a problem particular to CGI programs arising from the fact that the HTML reference to the CGI program may be issued without relation to any particular web page. Consequently, any CGI program implementing an access counter or other auditing or accounting data collecting program can produce an artificially inflated access count from repeated reference to the CGI program

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HTML statement outside and independent of a proper web page. Access spoofing inherently undermines the apparent if not actual integrity of any data gathered by a CGI program. Since, at minimum, the ability to insure the accuracy of even a simple access count would be of fundamental importance to an Internet service advertiser, the use of CGI programs to provide even basic accounting or auditing functions is of limited practical use. Finally, HTML does not provide a tamper-proof way for two URLs to be accessed in sequence with just one URL reference button, such as, for example, a server CGI counter URL reference followed by external server URL reference.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Thus, a general purpose of the present invention is to provide a system and method of reliably tracking and redirecting hyper-link references to external server systems.

This is achieved by the present invention through the provision of a message to a tracking server system in response to a client system referencing a predetermined resource locator that corresponds to a resource external to the tracking server system. The tracking server system indirectly provides for the client system to have an informational element selectable by the client system, where the informational element is graphically identified on the client system with informational content obtainable from a content server system through use of a content resource locator. The informational element includes a tracking resource locator, referencing the tracking server system, and data identifying the informational element. The selection of the informational element causes the client system to use the tracking resource locator to provide the data to the tracking server system and to use the content resource locator to obtain the informational content from the content server system.

Thus, an advantage of the present invention is that URL reference data is captured in an expedient manner that interposes a minimum latency in returning the ultimately referenced web page while imposing minimum visibility of the redirection protocol on client users.

Another advantage of the present invention is that independent invocations of server external support programs and multiple external data references are not required as a consequence of the present invention, thereby minimizing the CPU and disk intensive load on the web server computer system and the resulting latency.

A further advantage of the present invention is that the reference identifier and a redirection directive can both be maintained wholly within the URL specification discretely provided by a client HTML request. Thus, the present invention is superior in both efficiency and maintenance requirements to a CGI counter, or any method that incorporates a CGI counter.

Still another advantage of the present invention is that program modifications necessary to support the protocol of the present invention are implemented entirely at the server end of a protocol transaction. Client side participation in the transaction is within the existing client side defined HTML protocol.

A still further advantage of the present invention is that the implementation of the invention introduces minimum exposure to additional security breaches due to the closed form of the protocol while providing substantial security against inappropriate URL and protocol references. This is accomplished preferably by the inclusion of validation codes inside the URL specification.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

These and other advantages and features of the present invention will become better understood upon consideration

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of the following detailed description of the invention when considered in connection with the accompanying drawings, in which like reference numerals designate like parts throughout the figures thereof, and wherein:

FIG. 1 provides a schematic representation of client and server computer systems inter-networked through the Internet;

FIG. 2 provides a block diagram of a server computer system implementing an HTTP daemon (HTTPd) server in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 3 provides a flow diagram illustrating the process performed by a preferred embodiment of the present invention in receiving and processing client URL requests;

FIG. 4 provides a flow diagram illustrating the server side processing of special redirect URLs in accordance with another preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 5 provides a generalized process representation of client and server computer systems implementing the alternate processes of the present invention;

FIG. 6 is a flow diagram illustrating a server-side process that provides for the issuance of a content request message in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention; and

FIG. 7 is a flow diagram illustrating a client-side process that provides for the issuance of a tracking message in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

A typical environment 10 utilizing the Internet for network services is shown in FIG. 1. Client computer system 12 is coupled directly or through an Internet service provider (ISP) to the Internet 14. By logical reference via a uniform resource locator, a corresponding Internet server system 16, 18 may be accessed. A generally closed hypertext transfer protocol transaction is conducted between a client browser application executing on the client system 12 and an HTTPd server application executing on the server system 16. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the server system 16 represents an Internet Business Service (IBS) that supports or serves web pages that embed hyper-link references to other HTTPd server systems coupled to the Internet 14 and that are at least logically external to the server system 16.

Within this general framework, the present invention enables the tracking of the selection of embedded hyper-link references by client system 12. That is, an embedded hyper-link reference is associated with a graphical banner or other Web page element that is selectable, or clickable, by a user of the client system 12. A banner click on a client system is typically made to obtain information, identified in some fashion by the banner graphic that is of interest to the client system user. Tracking is preferably enabled by embedding HTML information in the Web page served to the client system 12. This information is served from any prearranged HTTPd server system to the client system 12. The prearrangement is with an IBS to track banner clicks, on Web pages served by or on behalf of a designated tracking HTTPd server system, such as system 16, that operates to collect the served page provided tracking information.

The embedded information is, in accord with the present invention, sufficient to enable the client computer system 12 to provide tracking information to the HTTPd server system

16. As will be seen, this information is also sufficient, directly or indirectly, to enable the client computer to request the information associated with the banner graphic. As will also be seen, there are a number of possible implementations of the present invention. These implementations can generally be categorized as predominately using either a server-side or client-side process, as involving proprietary, plug-in, and interpreted control processes, and as using any of a number of specific data transfer protocols.

The preferred embodiment of the present invention utilizes a server-side process implemented as a proprietary modification to the HTTPd server application executed by the server system 16 and that uses the HTTP redirection directive. Thus, a web page served by an HTTPd server system, such as the server system 16 or another server system (not shown) to the client 12 embeds a URL reference to a web page served by the logically external server system. Selection of this embedded URL through the client browser of the client computer system 12 results initially in an HTTP transaction with the server system 16 rather than the external server. The information stored in the embedded URL first served with the web page to client system 12 is thus provided back to the server system 16 upon selection of the URL even though the apparent target of the URL is the external server system. A redirection response is then provided by the server system 16 to the client system 12 providing the corresponding redirection URL.

As shown in FIG. 2, the server system 16 receives the redirection request information via a network connection 20 to a network interface 22 within the server system 16. The network interface 22 is coupled through an internal bus 24 to a central processing unit (CPU) 26. The CPU 26 executes a network operating system 28 in support of the network interface 22 and other functional aspects of the server system 16. The network operating system 28 supports the execution by the CPU 26 of an HTTPd server application 30 that defines the responsive operation of the server system 16 to HTTP requests received via the network 20. Finally, the network operating system 28 provides for temporary and persistent storage of data in a mass storage device 32 preferably including a persistent storage media such as provided by a conventional hard disk drive.

In accordance with the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the embedded redirection information provided as part of a URL HTTP request is processed by the HTTPd server 30. Preferably, the processing by the HTTPd server 30 is performed through the execution of the server 30 itself as opposed to the execution of any external CGI programs or the like. The redirection information is processed by the execution of the server 30 to identify and validate the particular URL reference that provided the redirection information and to generate a redirection target URL.

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, an embedded URL containing redirection information is formatted as follows:

```
http://<direct_server>/redirect?<data>?http://<redirect_server>
```

The direct_server portion of the embedded URL specifies the HTTP server target of a transaction that is to be initially established by the client system 12. The remaining information is provided to the tracking or targeted direct server. The direct server may be any HTTPd server accessible by the client system 12 that has been designated to service redirection requests in accordance with the present invention.

The term "redirect" in the embedded redirection URL is a key word that is pre-identified to the HTTPd server 30 to specify that the URL corresponds to a redirection request in accordance with the present invention. Although the term "redirect" is the preferred term, any term or code may be selected provided that the term can be uniquely identified by the HTTPd server 30 to designate a redirection URL. The recognition processing of the "redirect" term is preferably performed through the execution of the server 30 by way of a corresponding modification to the HTTPd server application. That is, the HTTPd server application is modified to recognize the term "redirect" as a key word and to execute a subprogram to implement the server-side process of this preferred embodiment. Alternately, the modification to the HTTPd server application can be implemented as a "plug-in" binary program operative through a conventional interface provided with the HTTPd server application to obtain essentially the same functionality. Although of possibly lesser performance, a server application embedded language, such as Java® or JavaScript®, may be also alternately used to implement the server-side process of recognizing the "redirect" key word and performing the further processing to implement the present invention.

The "data" term of the redirection URL provides reference identifier data to the HTTPd server 30 that can be used to further identify and potentially validate a redirection URL to the HTTPd server 30. The data thus permits an accounting of the redirection URL to be made by the HTTPd server 30. In the context of an advertisement, the data may encode a particular advertising client for whom access data may be kept, a particular instance of the graphic image provided to a client system 12 in association with the redirection URL, and potentially a validation code that may serve to ensure that inappropriate client uses of a redirection URL can be distinguished and discarded by the HTTPd server 30.

An exemplary redirection URL, constructed using HTML in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, is as follows:

```
<a href="http://www.infoseek.com/IS/redirect?NwPg-003-  
AA?http://www.newspage.com">
```

Within the redirection data, the data component "NwPg" serves as a client or account identifier. The data component "003" is a series identifier indicating a particular graphic image that was associated with the redirection URL as embedded in the web page served to the client system 12. Finally, the data component "AA" may be utilized to provide a basic validation identifier that serves to permit the HTTPd server 30 to identify inappropriate repeated submissions of the redirection URL to the server system 16 or those that are determined to be obsolete by convention.

In an alternate embodiment of the present invention, the validation data encodes a data representation that can be used in conjunction with the HTTP protocol to provide information regarding the client system 12 that submitted the redirection URL and, optionally, the graphics series identifier data, to limit repeated use of the redirection URL by the same client system 12 within a defined short period of time. Thus, an inappropriate attempt by a third party client to, in effect, tamper with the data collected by the server system 16 with respect to any particular redirection URL can be identified with relative if not complete certainty and blocked. In addition, date codes older than a certain time interval can be declared by computation to be invalid. Consequently, a copy of the embedded redirection URL cannot be stored on a client system 12 and remain viable for

use for longer than a period of time defined exclusively by the server computer system 16.

Each of the data terms within a redirection URL may be statically or dynamically created by the HTTPd server 30 as part of the process of originally serving a web page with the embedded redirection URL to a client computer system 12. With dynamic generation, different graphic images corresponding to a single advertiser or one of any number of advertisers may be effectively served with an otherwise statically defined web page. The data terms of the embedded redirection URL may be dynamically selected based on the identity of the advertiser and graphics image in addition to separately establishing a hypertext link to the graphics image as part of an instance of serving a particular web page by the HTTPd server 30. Indeed, the selection of advertiser and graphics image could be made at least in part on the identity of the client computer system 12 as established through information provided by the conventional operation of the HTTP protocol, and on the client profile if known.

The validation code may also be dynamically generated. In an alternate embodiment of the present invention, the validation code encodes a representation of the day of the year with the account and image identifier data terms to generate an identifier, preferably encoded as two digits, that provides a sufficient degree of uniqueness to allow an embedded redirection URL to be aged on a per day basis. Furthermore, the validation code remains constant on a per day basis and thereby still permits the number of references on a per day per specific client system 12 basis to be tracked by the HTTPd server 30 so as to limit the frequency that a specific instantiation of the web page is repeatedly presented to a specific client 12. Additionally, the HTTPd server 30 may operate to block operation on a received redirection URL where the corresponding web page has not recently been served to the requesting client 12.

Various bit shift, check sum, and modulo arithmetic algorithms can be utilized to generate the validation code in a consistent manner known to the HTTPd server 30, but that cannot be readily discerned upon examination of the resulting redirection URL by a specific client computer system 12. Alternately, the validation code may be an arbitrarily selected value that is implicitly recognized as valid by the HTTPd server 30 for a programmable period of time from one day to several weeks or longer. In the extreme, and consistent with the initially preferred embodiment of the present invention, the validation code is a static value provided as part of the embedded redirection URL.

Independent of the particular manner the validation code is generated or the assigned length of time that the code is recognized by the HTTPd server 30 as valid, evaluation of the data terms of a redirection URL is preferably performed completely internally to the HTTPd server 30. The data terms are preferably sufficiently complete as to be unambiguous in identifying a particular instantiation of an embedded redirection URL without significant, if any, resort to the loading and execution of an external program or even significantly to interrogate look-up files stored by the persistent storage device 32. Consequently, the burden of evaluating a redirection URL in accordance with the present invention is almost completely computational in nature. As is conventionally appreciated, the performance of a server computer system 16 is not typically computationally bound, but rather bound by the rate of input/output (I/O) access to the persistent storage device 32 and to the network 20. By substantially if not completely limiting the evaluation of the redirection URL to a computational operation, with only a limited I/O operation to save auditing or accounting data

obtained in connection with a redirection URL, an optimally minimal burden on the server computer system 16 is realized by the operation of the present invention. Indeed, the saving of accounting or auditing data may be cached by the network operating system 28 to defer the write I/O operation to the persistent storage device 32 until otherwise excess I/O bandwidth is available in the ongoing operation of the server computer system 16.

The final portion of the preferred structure of a redirection URL is a second URL. This second URL preferably identifies directly the target server system for the redirection. Preferably, any path portion provided as part of the direct server specification of the redirection URL is repeated as a path component of the redirect server portion of the redirection URL. However, path portion identity is not required. In general, all that is required in accordance with the present invention is a one to one correspondence between the direct server and redirect server terms of the redirection URL. A less strict relationship may be used if the impact upon the auditing or accounting data collected by the operation of the present invention is consistent with the desired characteristic of that data. For example, different direct server specifications may correlate to the use of a common redirect server as a means of further identifying a particular instantiation of an embedded redirection URL. Alternately, otherwise identical instantiations of an embedded redirection URL may reference any of a number of redirect servers. Thus, the embedded redirection URL provides only an indirect reference to the ultimately servicing redirect server and relies on the direct server identified server system or the redirect servers themselves to resolve the second URL into a direct reference to an ultimately servicing redirect server. This may be done to distribute load on the cooperatively operating redirect servers or to provide a means for verifying the auditing or accounting data collected by the ongoing operation of the present invention. Indeed, the second URL of a redirection URL can itself be a redirection URL, though care needs to be taken not to create an infinite redirection loop.

A preferred method 40 of processing redirection URLs provided to a server computer system 16 by a client computer system 12 is illustrated in FIG. 3. As each client request is received 42 the data provided as part of the request is examined to determine whether the request embeds the redirect key word 44. If the URL data does not specify a redirection request consistent with the present invention, the URL data is checked 46 to determine whether the URL data conventionally specifies an existent local web page. If the web page does not exist or, based on the client identification data provided via the HTTP protocol in connection with the URL client request, the particular client is not permitted access to the existent web page, the HTTPd server 30 determines a corresponding error message 48 that is returned to the client computer system 12. Otherwise, the HTTPd server 30 proceeds and serves the local web page 50 to the client computer system 12.

Where URL data at least specifies a redirection request 52, the URL data is further checked for validity. A table of valid combinations of client and graphic image identifiers, preferably cached in memory in the server system 16, may be used to initially establish the validity of the redirection request. The validation code may either be checked by recalculation based on the provided redirection data or checked against another table of validation codes that are current. In either event, the relative timeliness of the redirection request can be determined from the age of the validation code and therefore serve as basis for determining whether the current redirection request is timely or suspect.

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Furthermore, additional checks may be performed to verify that the corresponding web page has indeed been served recently by the server computer system 16 to the particular requesting client computer system 12 based on a short term log of local web pages actually served by the server computer system 16. Finally, access permissions enforced by the server computer system 16 can be checked against the identification of the client computer system 12 to categorically limit redirection to defined classes of clients. Where the request is determined to be invalid for any reason, an appropriate denial message is generated and issued 48.

Where a redirection request is determined valid, any or all of the data provided as part of the redirection request or provided to the HTTPd server 30 through the conventional operation of the HTTP protocol can be logged through the network operating system 28 to the persistent storage device 32 for subsequent manipulation, analysis and reporting. The redirection request is then further processed to obtain the second URL identifying the target redirection server 56. This second URL is then specified in the location field of a redirection message, preferably a temporary redirection message, that is issued 58 back to the client computer system 12 that issued the redirection URL initially.

The process 40 in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, is performed essentially entirely within the HTTPd server 30. The implementation of the process 40 can be performed through a modification and extension of the processing flow implemented by the HTTPd server 30, through a corresponding modification of the server source code. These modifications and additions may be made utilizing conventional programming techniques.

The redirection capability provided by the present invention is fully consistent with existent de-facto standard redirection capabilities provided by conventional HTTPd servers. A further detailed portion 60 of the process 40 is shown in FIG. 4. Within the operation of the HTTPd server 30, the URL data 62 is received and initially parsed 64 to identify the appropriate existence of the redirect key word. Where the specific form of the redirection URL of the present invention is not identified 66, the URL is further processed in a conventional manner to determine whether any other form of redirection is applicable. In addition, an evaluation of conventional access privileges to a local web page where no conventional redirection is specified can also be performed with, ultimately, an appropriate response message being issued 68.

In the specific instance where the URL request is of the special redirect form consistent with the present invention, as opposed to conventional HTML redirection capabilities, the URL data is processed 70 and, in combination with the HTTP protocol-provided data identifying the client computer system 12, a database record is created or updated in the persistent mass storage device 32 at 72. The second URL is then extracted 74 and a redirection message, specifically a type 302 temporary redirection message, is prepared. As before, the second URL may be a direct or literal URL or an indirect redirection target server identification that is resolvable by the HTTPd server 30 into a URL that is at least sufficient to identify the target redirection server. Since the second URL, as embedded in a Web page, is defined through prearrangement with the operation of the HTTPd server 30, resolution of any indirect redirection target server identification is fully determinable by the HTTPd server 30 through, for example, a database look-up operation.

A redirection message including a location field is then created by the HTTPd server 30. This location field is provided with the direct or resolved target redirection server

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URL. The redirection message is then issued 58 to the originally requesting client computer system 12.

Other server-side operative embodiments of the present invention can use other specific protocols to transfer the tracking information from the client system 12 to the HTTPd server 30. These other HTTP protocol methods include, for example, GET, FORMS, OPTIONS, HEAD, PUT, DELETE, AND TRACE. Use of these other protocol methods are generally similar, differing in their requirements for specific browser support for the protocol methods and details of their specific HTML markup coding into Web pages.

As an example of the use of these other protocol methods, the HTTP GET method can be implemented by embedding the following HTML code tags in the Web pages served to a client computer system.

```
// HTTP GET
<a href = "http://www.infoseek.com/redirect?
  ak = MTCH-2009-1073-GEN&
  rd = http://www.match.com/">
<img src = "http://www.online.com/ads/MTCH1073.gif">
</a>
```

This HTML code defines "MTCH1073.gif" as the Web page banner graphic, "www.infoseek.com" as the direct_URL, "MTCH-2009-1073-GEN" as the data, and "www.match.com" as the target redirection server.

When the above HTML tags are served to the client computer system, an initial HTTP GET request is issued to "www.online.com" to obtain the banner graphic. In response to a banner click, a second GET request is directed to "www.infoseek.com" using the URL:

```
/redirect?ak=MTCH-2009-1073-GEN&rd=http://www.match.com/
```

The complete GET request will be of the form:

```
GET /redirect?ak=MTCH-2009-1073-GEN&
  rd = http://www.match.com/HTTP/1.0
User-Agent: Mozilla/3.0
Accept:image/gif, image/jpeg, */*
```

The HTTPd server 30 records the values of MIME information (such as cookies) and the form variables (in this case ak and rd). An HTTP redirect message is then created by the HTTPd server 30 and returned to the client computer system. A third and final GET request is then issued to "www.match.com" in response to the redirection message.

As another example, an HTTP POST method can be used. The Web page embedded HTML tags can be coded as follows:

```
// HTTP POST
<FORM method = "POST" \
  action = "http://www.infoseek.com/redirect">
  <INPUT TYPE = hidden \
    NAME = "ak" \
    VALUE = "MTCH-2009-1073-GEN">
  <INPUT TYPE = hidden \
    NAME = "rd"
```

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-continued

```

VALUE = "http://www.match.com/">
<INPUT TYPE = image|
  SRC = "http://www.online.com/ads/MTCH1073.gif">
</FORM>

```

This HTML code will result in a GET request being issued automatically to "www.online.com" to retrieve the banner graphic. A banner click will result in a HTTP POST request being sent to "www.infoseek.com" along with the FORM NAME and VALUE data. In this case, the data is not encoded into the URL, but rather is encoded in the body of the POST request itself. In this example, the POST request will have the form:

```

POST /redirect HTTP/1.0
User-Agent: Mozilla/3.0
Accept: image/gif, image/jpeg, */*
Content-type: application/x-www-form-urlencoded
Content-length: 54
a k = MTCH-2009-1073-GEN&rd=http://
www.match.com/

```

When the returned redirection message is received, another GET request is issued by the client computer system to the redirection target server, which is again "www.match.com."

In accordance with the present invention, a client-side process can also be utilized to transparently provide notification of the selection of a Web page element by a client computer system. FIG. 5 provides a representation 78 of the data transfer flows involved in both the server-side and client-side processes that implement the present invention. Common to both server-side and client-side process implementations, a client computer system 80 issues an initial Web page request over the Internet (not shown) to a Web page server system 82. A corresponding Web page 84 including a Web page element 86 is returned to the client computer system 80.

Again, common to both server-side and client-side process implementations of the present invention the Web page element 86 is provided through the embedding of information in the Web page 84. In the circumstance of a server-side process as generally depicted in FIG. 6, the process of the present invention following from a banner click 96 results in a client browser action. Specifically, the embedded information controls the operation of the Web browser on the client computer system sufficient to issue a notification URL 98 directed to the redirection target server system 88, as shown in FIG. 5. The server process 100 initiated in response to the notification URL receipt produces the redirection message that is returned to the client computer system 80. In connection with the generation of the redirection message, the server system 88 also logs and optionally processes the data received as part of the notification URL 98.

Based on the redirection message, the client computer system 80 then preferably issues an HTTP request 102 based on the information contained in the redirection message. Referring again to FIG. 5, the HTTP request 102 is provided via the Internet 14 to another Web page server system 90 that responds in a conventional manner by the serving of Web page 92 to the client computer system 80 as the Web page 104 that was inferentially referenced by the Web page element 86.

The method of the present invention utilizing a client-side process is generally shown in FIG. 7. The method 106, for the purposes of explanation here, generally begins in

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response to a banner click 108 to initiate a client process 110 executing in connection with the operation of the Web browser on the client computer system 80. In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, the client process 110 is provided with the Web page 84 to the client computer system 80. The client process 110 is invoked in response to the banner click and operates to first issue a notification URL message 112 and, second, to issue an HTTP request 114. Both messages are issued through the Internet 14 and to the target server system 88 and Web page server 90, respectively. The order that the client process 110 issues the notification URL 112 and HTTP request 114 is not significant. Further, acknowledgment of the receipt of the notification URL from the target server system 88 is not required prior to issuing the HTTP request 114. Indeed, as evident to the user of the client computer system 80, the only response recognized as significant is the receipt 116 of the Web page 92.

As in the case of the server-side process, the client-side process 110 can be implemented in a number of different manners that, for purposes of the present invention, each result in the delivery of data to the target server system 88 and a URL request to a Web page server system 90 to provide a Web page 92 having a prearranged correspondence with the Web page element 86. Specifically, the client-side process can be directly coded into the browser application or supplied as a browser plug-in to a conventional browser application. The client-side process can also be implemented through use of Java and JavaScript type applets.

An exemplary client-side process is implemented through the use of a Java Applet. The HTML code that is embedded in the Web page 84, for purposes of this example, is as follows:

```

<applet name = "ad" code = "ad.class" width = 468 height = 60>
<param name = img value = "ad.gif">
<param name = notifyurl value = "?MTCH-2009-1073-GEN">
<param name = pageurl value = "http://catalog.online.com/">
</applet>

```

where the three applet parameters are defined as follows:

- "img" - the URL reference to a graphic banner advertisement
- "notifyurl" - the "notification" URL holding the accounting data
- "pageurl" - the "redirection" URL to use

The applet source is as follows:

```

import java.applet.Applet;
import java.awt.Image;
import java.awt.Graphics;
import java.net.URL;
import java.net.MalformedURLException;
import java.io.IOException;
public class ad extends Applet {
  Image image;
  URL notifyurl;
  URL pageurl;
  public void init() {
    image = getImage(getDocumentBase(), getParameter("img"));
    try {
      logurl = new URL(getDocumentBase(),
        getParameter("notifyurl"));
      pageurl = new URL(getDocumentBase(),
        getParameter("pageurl"));
    } catch (MalformedURLException e) {}
  }
  public void paint(Graphics g) {
    g.drawImage(image, 0, 0, this);
  }
}

```

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-continued

```

public boolean mouseDown(java.awt.Event evt, int x, int y) {
    try {
        logurl.openStream().close();
    } catch (java.io.IOException e) { }
    getAppletContext().showDocument(pageurl);
    return true;
}

```

The above example uses two HTTP requests to first issue the "notifyurl" message and, second, to issue the "pageurl" message. Various other protocols, however, can be used in connection with the present invention. For example, the Java applet can be modified to provide the notification data to the target server system 88 through use of a TCP connection. An exemplary implementation of an applet utilizing a TCP connection is provided below. The applet takes four parameters:

"img"—the URL of the ad image to show

"port"—the TCP port number to use on the target server

"data"—the accounting data to send to the target server

"pageurl"—the "redirection" URL to use

The applet source is as follows:

```

import java.applet.Applet;
import java.awt.Graphics;
import java.awt.Image;
import java.io.IOException;
import java.io.OutputStream;
import java.io.PrintStream;
import java.lang.Integer;
import java.lang.String;
import java.net.MalformedURLException;
import java.net.Socket;
import java.net.URL;
import java.net.URL;
public class ad extends Applet {
    Image image;
    String host,data;
    int port;
    URL url;
    public void init() {
        image = getImage(getDocumentBase(), getParameter("img"));
        host = getDocumentBase().getHost();
        port = Integer.parseInt(getParameter("port"));
        data = getParameter("data");
        try {url = new URL(getDocumentBase(),
            getParameter("pageurl"));}
        catch (MalformedURLException e) {}
    }
    public void paint(Graphics g) {
        g.drawImage(image, 0, 0, this);
    }
    public boolean mouseDown(java.awt.Event evt, int x, int y) {
        try {
            Socket socket = new Socket(host,port);
            PrintStream ps = new
            PrintStream(socket.getOutputStream());
            ps.print(data);
            ps.close();
        } catch (java.io.IOException e) { }
        getAppletContext().showDocument(url);
        return true;
    }
}

```

Finally, the above applet can be referenced for execution by embedding the following HTML code into the Web page 84.

```

<applet name="ad" code="ad.class" width=468 height=
60>
<param name=img value="ad gif">

```

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```

<param name=port value="21">
<param name=data value="MTCH-2009-1073-GEN">
<param name=url value="http://catalog.online.com/">
</applet>

```

Thus, a comprehensive system and method for accounting or auditing accesses made by client computer systems to external hyper-linked servers has been described. The auditing capabilities of this system process impose optimally minimal overhead burden on the redirection server system while permitting the data that is gathered to be validated and reasonably assured to correspond to bona fide accesses to a redirection target server system.

While the invention has been particularly shown and described with reference to preferred embodiments thereof it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of providing a message to a tracking server system in response to a client system referencing a predetermined resource locator that corresponds to a resource external to said server system, said method comprising the steps of:

a) providing for a client system to have an informational element selectable by said client system, wherein said informational element is graphically identified on said client system with informational content obtainable from a first server system through use of a first resource locator, and wherein said informational element includes a second resource locator referencing a second server system and data identifying said informational element;

b) providing for said client system to separately use said second resource locator to provide said data to said second server system in response to the selection of said informational element; and

c) providing for said client system to separately use said first resource locator to obtain said informational content from said first server system in response to the selection of said informational element.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein said client system proceeds autonomously in response to the selection of said informational element to use said first resource locator to obtain said informational content from said first server system and to use said second resource locator to provide said data to said second server system.

3. The method of claim 2 further comprising the step of providing said client system with said first resource locator in response to the receipt of said data.

4. The method of claim 2 further comprising the step of providing said client system with a control program that provides for the execution of a client process in response to the selection by said client system of said informational element.

5. The method of claim 3 or 4 wherein said data includes accounting data sufficient to identify said informational element.

6. A method of tracking the occurrences of Web page banner click-through references by users of client computer systems to corresponding Web pages where such occurrences are tracked by a tracking computer system transparently with respect to the client computer system users, said method comprising the steps of:

a) enabling a Web page element to be provided to a predetermined client computer system such that said Web page element is selectable by the user of said

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predetermined client computer system and wherein said Web page element is identified with a content provider computer system; and

- b) providing for predetermined tracking information to be provided to said predetermined client computer system with said Web page element so as to be maintained by said client computer system in relation to said Web page element such that, in response to selection of said Web page element by the user of said predetermined client computer system, said predetermined tracking information is used automatically by said client computer system to provide tracking data to said tracking computer system and to separately provide a content request to said content provider computer system.

7. The method of claim 6 wherein said Web page element identifies obtainable content to the user of said predetermined client computer system and wherein said content request is maintained with said predetermined tracking information by said predetermined client computer system.

8. The method of claim 7 wherein selection of said Web page element provides for initiation of a client-side process that submits said predetermined tracking information to said tracking computer system and said content request to said content provider computer system.

9. The method of claim 8 wherein said tracking computer system processes said predetermined tracking information to provide an identification of said content provider computer system to said predetermined client computer system and wherein said predetermined client computer system uses said identification to provide said content request to said content provider computer system.

10. The method of claim 8 wherein said client-side process provides for the autonomous submission of said predetermined tracking information to said tracking computer system and said content request to said content provider computer system, said content request including an identification of said content provider computer system sufficient to provide said content request to said content provider computer system.

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11. The method of claim 10 wherein said predetermined client computer system executes a browser application to receive and process said Web page element and wherein said client-side process is performed by execution of a control script by said browser application.

12. The method of claim 10 wherein said predetermined client computer system executes a browser application to receive and process said Web page element and wherein said client-side process is performed by execution of a plug-in control program coupled into said browser application.

13. The method of claim 10 wherein said predetermined client computer system executes a browser application to receive and process said Web page element and wherein said client-side process is performed by an application program executed by said predetermined client computer system under the control of said browser application.

14. A method of tracking the click-through selections of advertising banners provided on Web pages provided by Web page server computer systems to client computer systems, said method comprising the steps of:

- a) providing for a Web page including a predetermined page element to be served into a browser application executed by a client computer system, said Web page including predetermined encoded accounting data and an identification of a Web page server computer system that is stored by said client computer system in connection with said predetermined page element;
- b) providing for the execution of a client-side process in connection with said browser application upon selection of said predetermined page element by a user of said client computer system, said client-side process providing for the transfer of said encoded accounting data to an auditing computer system and separately providing for the issuance of a predetermined Web page request to said Web page server system consistent with said identification.

* * * * *